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## CHILD LABOR IN CANNERIES

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Child labor which has no legal regulation is the subject of this meeting. The hosts of children employed in agriculture are included under this head, and one great industry which stands on the borderline between factory law and agriculture, namely, the canning industry, employing thousands of children unrestricted by any sort of legal regulation. It has had this freedom on account of its supposedly agricultural character.

In New York State, in fact, an opinion of the attorney general specifically exempts work in the cannery sheds from the protection of the labor law, on the ground that such work is not injurious. It is true that most of the occupations are carried on in the open air. The cannery provide sheds where the preparation and cleaning of fruit and vegetables is done, such processes as hulling strawberries, stemming cherries and plums, stringing beans, cleaning tomatoes and apples, and husking corn. But here the resemblance to agriculture stops, for in speeding, intensity of application and long hours, cannery work is as exhausting as any other form of factory work.

Canneries depend for their labor almost exclusively on women and children. On account of the perishability of their product and even more on account of the unorganized and irregular method of securing their raw materials, these establishments work overtime to a degree almost unprecedented in any other industry. It is not at all unusual for young girls and women to work for eighty or ninety hours a week. They have been known to work for eighteen hours of the twenty-four in certain canneries in New York State.

In order to secure a sufficiently large labor supply when the country towns do not furnish enough workers, the canneries are calling more and more upon the cities. In New York State as well as in New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland, there is a yearly exodus from the large cities of Italian and Polish families who seek this work for the summer months. Young and old alike work in the sheds.

Mothers take their nursing children with them, and children from four years up have been found stringing beans. This is the crop that calls for most hand-work, as no machine has yet been invented that will string beans. Therefore, at the height of the bean season which often lasts for six weeks, the canners get their workers out at 4 A. M. and may keep them employed until midnight. The pay varies from one to one-and-one-half cents a pound. Under these conditions the immigrants are stimulated to work as long as they can stay awake, taking no time to attend to household matters or to the needs of their children.

Moreover, the living quarters provided by the canners are often shamefully over-crowded. Fifty people, including men, women and children, may be housed in an old barn; or shacks may be erected of the poorest construction, allowing but one small room for a whole family of adults and children. Often several hundred persons live together in the utmost squalor lacking all the decencies of life, under unhygienic conditions that would not be tolerated in any city. Thus, the much-talked-of benefits of country life for city workers during the summer months are nowhere apparent.

The children are pressed into the work, especially during the bean season, in order to add to the family income. Their little fingers are particularly dexterous in bean stringing. They sit close to mother or sister, working for hours at intense speed. They may be released to take a box of beans to the weigher, carrying for several hundred feet weights far too heavy for their tender years. At night it is no uncommon sight to see a whole family of children fall asleep over their work, while their parents stolidly keep on as long as the supply of beans holds out. Lack of sleep, exposure to inclement weather, and insufficient food add to these deplorable conditions.

The deprivation of schooling is another serious evil. These families frequently do not return to their winter homes until long after the beginning of the school year, in some cases continuing to work at late crops until Christmas. The younger children may be unemployed for months and rove around the country-side, neglected by their parents and uncared for by health or school officers. The local schools assume no responsibility for them, and when they return to the city they have fallen far behind their regular classes. In a special inquiry in the schools of Buffalo, N. Y., the teachers

gave distressing evidence as to the backwardness of the cannery children. They do not catch up with their classes before they are again carried off to the canneries early in June, becoming a burden to the public school and losing all the benefit of consecutive school life. In one school it was shown that seventy-seven children under fourteen years of age were absent at the beginning of the fall term for this reason. The New York State compulsory education law requires ten months' attendance, yet thousands of these cannery children, who particularly need the assimilating influence of our public schools, are habitual truants. No local or state official concerns himself with these little strangers, who, though born in America, are likely to grow up as foreign as their immigrant parents. Is it not of immediate concern that these young boys and girls, future citizens of our country, should have proper supervision? The problem is presumably the same in all the states where canneries are found. It is an industry which is growing by leaps and bounds, dependent to a large degree upon the hordes of immigrant workers.

No exact estimate has ever been made of the number of children employed. In one New York State cannery alone 300 children under fourteen years of age were found at work in August, 1909. Surely enough is known of the extraordinary extent of this form of child labor and the peculiarly undesirable living conditions at many canneries, to call for further investigation and immediate legal restriction of the one great employing industry that still stands outside of the factory law.